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School-to-Work Programs to Facilitate Youth Employment and Learning

Traditional vocational education, stereotypically thought of as "shop classes," has undergone a radical transformation. Technical education classes of today emphasize the integration of academic and vocational skills. School districts collaborate closely with employers to ensure that the skills and knowledge that are taught align with today's workplaces. Tech-prep programs articulate coursework from high school through two-year postsecondary degrees. The term "vocational education" has been replaced by the terms school-to-work or school-to-career programs. The federal government gave this transformation a boost with the passage of the 1994 School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA).

The school-to-work initiatives that the federal government and states are launching lie at the intersection of two major problems facing the United States. The first problem is an awkward system for youth to make the transition from formal schooling into careers. Despite keen international competition, the United States is not making productive use of the millions of young people between 18 and 28 who have marginal attachment to the labor force and who exhibit excessive rates of turnover and unemployment. This problem is intensified for young people who may be identified as at-risk.

The second problem that school-to-work initiatives are targeted on is the need for systemic reform of public education. Since the publication of the report, *A Nation at Risk*, the United States has been grappling with the issue of educational reform. Proponents of school-to-work initiatives suggest that work-based programs may facilitate learning for students whose learning styles accommodate practical, "hands on" approaches. Research is beginning to suggest that at-risk youth may benefit most from work-based learning strategies.

The purpose of this article is to describe briefly the nature of school-to-work programs, to indicate the status of these programs across the country, and to identify some barriers or constraints that they face and how policy makers might respond to these barriers.

School-to-Work Program Models

The school-to-work programs that have been established in different settings and contexts across the country do not follow any one model. Programs differ in terms of credentials offered, extent to which postsecondary institutions are involved, extent to which learning takes place at a worksite, whether or not work-based learning situations are paid, age of student, target populations, target occupations, and other characteristics. The following four elements represent criteria that might be used to classify a program as a school-to-work transition program:

- it constitutes an identifiable, formal part of a secondary and/or postsecondary curriculum with an explicit objective of facilitating the transition from formal schooling to work

- it involves active participation of employers
- it involves actual or simulated on-the-job experience
- it results in formal or informal certification of skills.

The major types of programs that meet these criteria include school-to-(registered) apprenticeships, youth or pre-apprenticeships, tech-prep education, career academies, cooperative education, school-based enterprises, business-education compacts, employer certified programs, worksite learning, and career exposure programs. (See Stern (1994) and Hollenbeck and Timmeney (1996) for summary descriptions of these program types.)

Status of School-to-Work Programs

School-to-work programs are beginning to take root at the national level. Several localities have implemented programs that demonstrate their potential effectiveness. A recent publication from Jobs for the Future (Kopp and Kazis 1995) provides an excellent review of ten innovative programs from across the country. Furthermore, an infrastructure of personnel, curricula, legislation, student outreach materials, and employer marketing techniques has developed. National staff development conferences are being held, and information is being exchanged on the Internet (see VOCNET, for example). Building on the successful demonstrations, most school districts are now developing or enhancing their school-to-work programs. In short, the current status of school-to-work programs is that they are "moving up to scale."

The strategy that the federal government is following through the STWOA is to provide substantial, five-year grants for states to foster the movement up to scale, but to allow the states to develop their own initiatives that suit their unique resources and needs. The states are competing for federal support and, to date, 27 states have been funded. The grants provide relatively small amounts of funding during the first and last years of the five-year period and relatively larger amounts in the middle years. This funding flow allows states to plan and design programs during the early phase of the grant. The substantial funding during the middle years of the state?s grant is to be used to grow programs at the local level. After the five-year period, the States and local districts will sustain the operating programs and federal support will disappear.

In a recent report (Hollenbeck 1996b), I documented the success that school-to-work programs are having with students. Through focus groups with students, I learned that school-to-work programs stimulate student interest in particular occupations (or occupational clusters), but they also bestow other career-related benefits. Students made useful employer contacts. They learned skills that will be useful in future education and career plans, even though they might not enter the specific occupations of the programs in which they were enrolled. Perhaps the most surprising lesson was the importance that the students placed on postsecondary attendance. The school-to-work programs encouraged some students to plan for postsecondary training who had not originally been headed in that direction. The programs provided students with information that helped them to select specific institutions and to narrow their fields of study. Articulation agreements allowed students to acquire college credits, and work experiences allowed students to gain hours toward occupational certification.

Concerns and Barriers that School-to-Work Programs Must Address

Perhaps the most severe barrier that school-to-work programs face as they proliferate is generating enough employer interest to accommodate all students. From the perspective of the employer, substantial costs are involved in being a worksite for students. These costs include time spent in meetings with educational partners to identify desired outcomes and to coordinate learning activities, costs accrued and time spent in preparing workplaces for students (e.g., insurance, reviewing and revising organizational policies and procedures, training employees, and managing student time and effort), and lost productivity of co-workers and supervisory personnel who participate in student training.

Most economists who have reviewed these programs sense that the benefits in the form of student productivity and potential reduced hiring costs do not offset the program costs. Program administrators and policy makers need to work on creative means of expanding work-based learning opportunities. School-based enterprises may be a potential solution. Funding the development and dissemination of "best practice" models that employers can easily emulate may be helpful. In limited situations, subsidies or tax credits may be necessary to engender employer support.

A second barrier to moving up to scale is the involvement and change required of postsecondary education. Most proponents of school-to-work programs realize that students need to pursue postsecondary training, and they are endeavoring to include postsecondary institutions in local programs. Such collaboration adds more partners to programs and increases accordingly the collaboration costs and hassles. However, there are reasons to bear the costs of including postsecondary institutions other than for the technical training that they may provide. Many parents perceive that school-to-work programs de-emphasize college attendance, and therefore they discourage their children from participating in them. (Some programs are changing their names to School-to-Career to overcome this perception.) Articulated programs that allow secondary students to earn college credits and active participation in local programs by postsecondary institutions should ameliorate parental concerns.

Another problem related to postsecondary education has been the inertia that four-year colleges and universities have displayed in failing to recognize the rigorous content of many school-to-work programs in their application and entrance procedures. The attitude that many of these institutions exhibit is that school-to-work programs are traditional vocational education and should not be counted toward required course work for admission. This is an area where state legislators could have a positive impact by using their leverage over state institutions to get them to adopt more enlightened treatments of school-to-work programs in their admissions processes.

Another issue that programs must face as they move to scale is provision of support mechanisms for students. Developing substantive programs that have rigor and relevance is paramount. But students also have transportation, vocational guidance, counseling, and worker protection needs to which districts must attend. These types of supports may be especially necessary for at-risk students.

Finally, it is critical that program administrators and policy makers invest program resources into ongoing data collection and evaluation. The scaling up of school-to-work initiatives is based on perceived successes of demonstration programs. Very little rigorous evaluation has been conducted. (An exception is a recently published net impact analysis of the Manufacturing Technology Partnership program in Genesee County, Michigan, conducted by Upjohn Institute staff. See Hollenbeck 1996a.) Without rigorous program evaluation based on valid measurement of outcomes and program interventions, educators and policy makers will never know whether school-to-work programs achieve their important objectives of improving the process of transition into the labor force for young people or achieving systemic reform of education.

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Suggested Readings

Hollenbeck, Kevin. 1996a. "An Evaluation of the Manufacturing Technology Partnership (MTP) Program.." Upjohn Institute Technical Report #96-007.

Hollenbeck, Kevin. 1996b. "In their Own Words: Student Perspective on School-to-Work Programs." (Washington, DC: National Institute for Work and Learning).

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